

Cries of the Savanna. An adventure. An awakening. A journey to understanding African wildlife conservation.

Chapter 1

The African Symphony

Umphhh. Umphhh. My eyes blinked open in alarm and confusion as the unfamiliar sound pierced the night air, instantly forming a knot in my gut. It was no human sound. At least, not one that I had ever heard. No, it was a low-pitched guttural cry--something raw, distinctive, and primal. *Umphhh.* Again, the primal call cut through the darkness, sending another wave of chills up and down my spine.

As I laid paralyzed in fear, the fog of my slumber gradually lifted, allowing pieces of reality to slip into place. Rick and I weren't snuggled side by side on our king-size bed. No. He was sleeping in a narrow bunk, similar to mine, six feet away. The new sleeping arrangement wasn't behind the secure walls of our rural Idaho home. We were behind the canvas panels of a wall tent. But unlike most of our outdoor excursions, we weren't in Idaho's backcountry wilderness. The distinctive *umphhh* belonged to none of the wild critters we were familiar with. Instead, we were in a remote expanse of the Tanzanian bush: an exotic land where the people, terrain, and animals were far different than anything we had ever experienced; a place where lions, hyenas, leopards, and elephants roamed freely throughout the landscape.

With that awareness, I puzzled over the bestial grunt. The *umphhh* sounded nothing like the king of beast's ferocious roars from MGM movie introductions. Still, there was little doubt that the foreboding sound belonged to anything other than a real, live, honest-to-goodness African lion. *Simba*, a simple but potent Swahili word. The dread I felt told me that it could be nothing else. We were, after all, in the heart of lion country: a fact that gave *Masimba* Camp its name.



Three days of international travel and sensory overload had turned us into little more than zombies when we crawled into our beds earlier that first night. Accordingly, we expected to fall asleep as soon as we hit the sheets. That didn't happen. The second the generator spit to silence and the staff vanished into their quarters, the din of camp life was replaced by an unfamiliar barrage of primal voices. *Whoop whooooooop whoop* followed by eerie chortles, *heeheehees*, and cackles. Then another *whhbhoopp whooop*.

"Hyenas." Rick whispered from the darkness across the tent.

Fisi, I thought to myself. The animal's Swahili name had been used at dinner in the retelling of a gruesome story, a tale that might have been better left unsaid, especially with a fearful reluctant greenhorn like me gobbling up every word.

Lying wide-eyed, I listened to *Fisi's* insane chorus – an ensemble of squeals, roars, growls, and a maniac-like hysteria – as it seeped through the canvas barrier from every direction.

Next, a deep bellowing oozed through the tent's walls. With this new vocal came Rick's best guess, "Has to be a hippo."

The next few hours continued like that, with Rick doing his best to decipher each new dialogue. A conglomeration of chittering, chattering, cooing, cawing, shrieking, growling, grunting, and crying. A symphony, so to speak, of bestial serenades. Still, during those first few hours, *Simba's* cries had been missing from the ghostly composition. We listened and waited; but none had come.



When exhaustion overpowered the unsettling vocals, we drifted off -- at least, until that first hair-raising *umphb* shattered our sleep. The deafening silence on the opposite end of the tent told me that Rick was also wide awake. After sleeping with someone for 15 years, the sound of their breathing is as telling as any words; he, too, was listening to the lion. How could he *not* be? The canvas walls, with eight mesh windows, offered little in the way of soundproofing. Even more alarming, the fabric provided laughable protection against deadly predators. Suddenly, our tent which had felt cozy and secure in the light of day felt vulnerable and exposed.

Tense energy filled the air as we listened to the lion's guttural calls. After a few moments, Rick whispered, "Our first lion."

With my gut twisted in a knot, a meek “aha” was all I could muster. Neither of us moved a muscle. We stayed frozen in our separate bunks with our ears focused on the unfamiliar sounds.

Eventually Rick’s hushed revelation, “Honey, we aren’t in Kansas anymore” was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“No kidding!” I quietly hissed as I slid out of my cot and climbed into his. Cramped. Uncomfortable. Overflowing. It mattered not.



Our tent at *Masimba* Camp along the dried up Mzombe River



While traveling to Africa had been a dream of mine since childhood, I never imagined sleeping in a primitive encampment where my slumber was cut short by wild creatures conducting their nightly shenanigans. Tromping through terrain riddled with deadly snakes was certainly not on my bucket list, and I *definitely* didn’t fancy the idea of being a sidekick on a hunting safari.

Although I am a non-hunter, the tradition wasn’t new to me; out of a family of eight, five were hunters -- my Dad and all four brothers. In rural Pennsylvania where we grew up, deer hunting was almost a religion. As you might imagine, our lives revolved largely around hunting seasons with wild game making up a huge part of our diet. Truth be told, I loved that

the boys hunted. Not only did they put meat on the table, but their gearing up in fluorescent orange meant they'd be spending long days in the woods, giving me a testosterone-free house for hours on end. A fact that made my teenage-self want to jump up and do a jig.

Still, the idea of killing doe-eyed critters myself was out of the question. I could barely make it through a Hallmark commercial without one of the boys sprinting to the kitchen, amid a bunch of giggles, to fetch a bucket for my tears. Still, hunting by association was such a part of my life that I had an innate understanding of its general merits, especially for subsistence and population control.

Therefore, it had not been a deal breaker when I met Rick and learned that he was also a dedicated hunter. As the strong silent type, he was the yin to my yang in many ways. His serious, quiet nature balanced out my more social, lighthearted disposition. Aside from that, he was a kind, intelligent, competent, hard-working country boy who grew up on a small ranch. As the cherry on top, he nursed a passion for the outdoors. That part of our personalities was totally in sync.

Like me, he also dreamt of Africa. His vision, however, was the polar opposite of mine. As a hunter, Rick wanted nothing more than to see wildlife in its natural state in some far-flung section of the bush, away from civilization and all of its trappings. He wanted to spend his days creeping through the savanna in pursuit of wild game and his nights sleeping in a primitive shelter where beastly serenades could be heard through the walls. He had zero desire to sleep in a fancy lodge, take an afternoon dip in a swimming pool, or cram on top of a safari vehicle with a slew of photo-tourists. That also meant no electricity, no solid walls, and no nearby medical facilities -- in a place where danger lurked everywhere. He wanted to experience the *real* Africa, not the watered-down sugarcoated version.

Understandably, as a non-hunter, I *did* want the watered-down sugar coated version. My concept of Africa included morning excursions through the national park systems teeming with wildlife. Wildlife who, by the way, paid little heed to the oodles of vehicles streaming by, accompanied by a cascade of *oohs* and *ahhs*. Sweltering afternoons would be spent lounging in a sparkling blue pool. Evenings would include dinner with like-minded safari-goers gasping in wonder at extraordinary photos of the day. Nights would be spent cozied up in a safe air-conditioned lodge. Sleeping would be a peaceful proposition on a cushy mattress nestled under a ceiling fan's gentle breeze. It was a wonderful dream.

Instead of all that, I found myself in a cluster of grass huts hundreds of miles away from such luxuries. You know the saying "*Happy Wife, Happy*

Life.” Well, that works both ways. Marriage is about compromise. Although Rick’s version of the dream was insanely different from mine, it still allowed me to experience Africa.

Still, accompanying him wasn’t without reservations. Aside from the danger factor, lions and snakes for example, it was hard to surrender to the idea of Rick hunting some of the world’s most beloved species. Extraordinary animals that filled me with awe and admiration for five decades.

While many kids were enthralled with Mickey Mouse and the Flintstones, I was held spellbound every Saturday morning with the cartoon adventures of Kimba, a brave white lion cub. Even though “Kimba the White Lion” only aired a few years in the mid 60’s, it kick-started my obsession with Africa. Next, I fed my fixation by watching as many “Tarzan” movie reruns as I could muster, especially on cold winter weekends.

It wasn’t an easy undertaking. In those early days, our family had only one television. Therefore, the shows we watched typically followed the unspoken guidelines of majority rules, especially if Dad was part of that majority. Just as Tarzan was about to rescue Jane from a pit of hissing vipers, my Dad and the boys would waltz into the room and -- click -- “*the Pittsburgh Steelers kicked a field goal.*” To this day, I am still traumatized by such interruptions. So many ghastly deeds in the wilds of Africa were left hanging in the air. Sometimes, literally.

Tarzan, of course, didn’t fight the evils of the world by his lonesome. Aside from Jane, Boy, and Cheetah, he had the whole animal kingdom at his disposal. The fact that the exciting adventures with fur-covered stars were fictitious did little to take away from their charm. Therefore, like so many others, I fell in love with Africa’s iconic residents. A devotion that followed me into adulthood.

Who isn’t captivated by six-ton monstrosities with sail-like ears and accordion noses; towering creatures of mottled gold whose soaring necks allow them to browse the treetops; mane-covered beasts who are killing machines, as well as doting parents; or horse-like grazers whose black and white stripes dazzle the landscape with striking grace? From my biased view, the Maker’s creativity seemed absolutely uninhibited and ingenious when designing Africa’s hodgepodge of wildlife.

The idea of hunting such exotic specimens seemed different from hunting deer, turkey, and elk, all of which enjoy healthy populations and provide food for the table. What kind of hypocrite would I be to judge hunters poorly as I slurped up the family favorite, spaghetti sauce made

with ground deer meat? It is also understandable that some animal populations must be controlled when faced with limited space. Mutilated deer carcasses littering Pennsylvania's roads make that point grotesquely clear. So, even though I hated the idea of hunting myself, essentially, I *got it*. Even so, when it came to hunting in Africa, I was deeply torn, especially regarding certain prized species.

Just like in the States, hunting would provide food, population control, and money for conservation. Yada yada yada. My head told me one thing, but my heart asked questions.

Weren't many of Africa's species endangered? If so, why could they sometimes be legally hunted? Human-wildlife conflict is a huge and growing problem in rural Africa but how does well-managed hunting help that problem? Why is population control even needed in lands that seem endless? What purpose does harvesting a leopard or lion serve? What about poaching? With illegal killing and wildlife trafficking already an issue, isn't legalized hunting just adding another nail in the coffin? Doesn't Africa have a reputation for corruption? Is such misconduct a widespread issue or confined to only a few nations and, most importantly, how does it affect wildlife conservation? Why is there such conflicting information regarding the actual threats to wildlife? Above all else, isn't general tourism -- a non-lethal approach to helping local communities and conserving wildlife -- a better alternative?

All these doubts, as well as the outright fear of sleeping amid wild critters, almost caused me to stay safely tucked away in our Idaho home.



Umphhh. The lion's grunt jolted me from my reverie. Still wedged against Rick on his tiny bunk, I returned my attention to *Simba's* primal serenade, *Fizi's* insane choruses, and the rest of Africa's beastly symphony. A realization surged through me. Finally, after years of anticipation, my African dream was coming true. It was nothing like I had envisioned, but nestled in a tent, hours from civilization, there was absolutely no turning back. Nor did I find myself wanting to. Even though apprehension filled my entire being, it became crystal clear that Rick's version of the dream was far more than anything I could have imagined for myself.

No doubt, there would be difficult and unsettling moments. Rick would very likely be harvesting some of the creatures that I had treasured since my first "Kimba the White Lion" cartoon. It was also clear that our

adventures would be partnered with aspects of danger. I couldn't help wondering how my romanticized view of Africa, after dreaming about it for so many years, would stand against reality.

Even with uncertainty gnawing at me, my feelings of apprehension and exhaustion floundered as other emotions trickled to the surface. Fascination. Excitement. Awe. Astonishment. Curiosity. And thankfulness. Lying wide-eyed -- covered in goosebumps listening to the chortles, bellows, growls, squeaks, whistles, cooing, cawing, *whooooops*, and *umphhs* of the African Symphony -- I realized that I had never felt so terror-stricken and yet, at the same time, so alive and exhilarated by the promise of the days to come.

NOTE: Several more chapters are available on Amazon in the "Look Inside" Feature.

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By Sue Tidwell

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